

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Voices Across The Ocean: Poetry from Australia & India* edited by Rob Harle and Jaydeep Sarangi (Cyberwit 2014)**

In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and thing violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.¹

Voices Across The Ocean, with its subtitle *Poetry from Australia & India*, reminds me of the words of William Wordsworth from his famous 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads'. This third anthology of poetry from Australia and India – the two previous anthologies are *Poetic Connections* and *Building Bridges* – combines Australian and Indian poets from divergent cultural backgrounds. The poets Rob Harle and Jaydeep Sarangi tie together poets from two different societies with the ribbon of poetic passion and let their chorus of emancipation and freedom spread among readers.

Attractively presented, the book looks like a 'saree' with an 'anchal' – the two Bengali words meaning a twelve-yard cloth with an arty end. It seems so because the texture of the book serially holds poems from five Australian and five Indian poets and ends with two poems from the editors, Rob Harle and Jaydeep Sarangi. The ten poets are Ali Cobby Eckermann, Bronwyn Owen Allen, Hamish Danks Brown, Nathalie Buckland, Peter Nicholson, Archana Sahni, D.C. Chambial, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Vinita Agrawal and Vivekananda Jha. Four poems from each poet are framed by the photos, brief biographies and contact details.

In this slim and sweet anthology's introduction, the editors talk about the general theme of the selected poems and the definition of poetry. According to them, the poems are commonly concerned with personal, social, religious and political emancipation. They opine that the poems try to voice the unheard voices of the non-poets who feel but fail to articulate like the poets. Thus, the poets included here, mostly women, speak aloud against the existing corruption, injustice and discrimination of human society in order to knock at the closed door of the conscience. This brings unity among the diverse poets. As the editors put it,

All the poets represented in this volume appear to us as deeply caring and hopeful of a better future for all humans, and even though they may seem as 'voices crying the wilderness' in this increasingly crass, mindless world of greed, corruption and political manipulation. They are saviours and heralds of a positive future for all of us. (4)

Ali Cobby Eckermann's poems begin the text with Australian poetry. Her poems liken the slow flow of a little brook that murmurs about silence, deprivation and deceit, entwined with the ordinary human life:

there is no escaping the silence

¹ Wordsworth, William. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads". The Harvard Classics, 1909-14.1-14. Selected by Charles W. Eliot. 8 April 2015. <http://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html>

when hunting a kangaroo for food by foot
nor the laughter of the chase
when a goanna is knocked out of a tree' ('Life is Often Silent' 8)

But she also writes that friendship, gratitude and light can end all negativity and make it desirable. She desires to be a mural, a silent observer, at a busy street in George Town so that she can 'watch the cultures and the care' (10) of human life.

Bronwyn Owen Allen, as 'a proud feminist' (12), writes about her personal desires and disappointments. In her personal life she always wants to break the rules and walk on the opposite highway but she confesses that, 'I was not born to cause hurt' (14).

Long, wordy and meditative, Hamish Danks Brown's poems blend personal and social issues using scientific and geographical knowledge. The poem 'Mentored By My Compass' conveys why and how the diasporic poet, Brown, wants to be guided by his spinning compass in 'the plain of passing irritants' (22-24). 'Valentine's Day 2002' does not tell us about love. Instead it talks about a trick the government played on protestors who have been against the transformation of the scenic and historical Sandon Point into a modern town:

Late that same Valentine's Night,
just as we were dozing off with delight,
a strong earth tremor reminded the region
that the Indo-Australian plate keeps moving north.(28)

Nathalie Buckland's poems are nihilistic in theme and approach. She draws the picture of a town, of a time, of a patient and of a woman in her four poems. In 'In My Town' she talks about the town that is ruled by the old women with shaking bodies. They do all works when the young ones flee away from them and push them inside the home. In 'Where is your baby?' she asks the mother where her baby is whom she carried, gave birth and reared once:

Where is your baby now?
Perhaps somebody took him,
trying to break the cycle, weaning him
from toxic mothering. (38)

In his poems, Peter Nicholson is conscious about the world where 'there's grief/hunger at hand,/ horror near the red borders' (46) and the country which forgets, 'Skin hooks of delight/Catching in the throat/Freedom's scarlet strength' (41). The poet wants to resist this with love and says in the poem numbered 'IV', 'We renew each circumstance/ With our feeling's radiance' (45).

The Indian poet Archana Sahni speaks out for the shackled and the exiled. Transliterating vocabularies of Tibet in English, she cries for the fettered Tibet, 'the roof of the world' (51), becoming free. Recounting wrong decisions of political leaders, she weaves the dream of returning to home:

I will come with you
When prayer flags wave

Amidst glittering sand or snow
And from the countless
Streaming eyes of your people,
A million lotus flowers bloom. (53)

In D.C. Chabial's lucid but profound and stimulating poems, the commonplace becomes rare and the simple becomes symbolic. In 'Cat and Dove' he says how the beauty and innocent is assaulted by the malefactors:

With the wink of an eye
harmless dove's done to death.
Happy the wily cat. (61)

Sanjukta Dasgupta writes as feminist using proper names like Mallika or Malini as the representatives of the tortured and agonised Indian women. She is revolutionary and rebellious, worships the Goddess Kali as her inspiration and pines for the Eleventh Muse Ardhanariswar as her guide. She considers 'Saree', the traditional Indian Subcontinental women's dress a chain to her that bars the progress of women:

Saree shackled woman
Crippled but with limbs intact

Waits and waits and waits
For that midnight hour
Of metaporphosis –
I am now stark dark Kali
With flying tresses. (67)

Vinita Agrawal sketches the scenario of a pain-stricken country which 'lies tortured and struggles to cope/Its heart lies buried in silence and despair/its soul lies banished, her freedom must crawl and grope' (85). Here she views 'a red hibiscus/flattened under you heel' (83), which symbolises the forced abortion of one babygirl after another but,

No obituaries will be written for it.
Newspapers won't report its loss. (83)

In this heartless world she wants to be that kind of 'Love' that 'is alive not dead, composite not hollow, hungry not satiated' ('Call Me Love Tonight' 84) as if she cannot be 'Cold in Oppression's Shadow' (85).

The poems of Vivekananda Jhasharply and sarcastically converse about 'Man, chief justice of animals' ('Cut-throat' 90), in whose heart 'Cruelty like sediments into water container' remains and 'spoils/ The serenity and sanctity' of it ('Cruelty' 92). This man imposes some inauthentic rules on the widows and does not acknowledge their needs and demands as human beings.

Rob Harle and Jaydeep Sarangi join this singing of the universal song of the poets through their poems 'Sandgate' and 'Stories of the Night'. Both poems sketch the night of the town they live in. Harle laments over a ferocious and furious city that does not give peace and rest to those who once built this city and now are in graves. Sarangi finds a mysterious feature of night when it falls. Someone with firm steps, he feels, walks besides us. He does not know who it is, but it opens the door of consciousness and drags him back or forth with the time to listen to its stories.

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